Workers Can Claim Pay For Free Hotel Rooms

The Associated Press

RALEIGH — State employees or officials who stay away from home on state business overnight can bill the state for lodging costs even if they didn't actually pay for lodging, officials said Thursday.

"It is an automatic payment, which the employee can claim on his expense account," said Charles Bryan, a budget administrator in the State Budget Office. "Of course those individuals would be entitled to stay at a motel and collect it, so there are two ways to look at it. But if they have the opportunity to stay free, they can collect."

"There's a state policy that makes it possible, and it is a practice that's carried out throughout the state," said Craig Phillips, superintendent of Public Instruction.

Phillips said Thursday he had refunded all the money he received from the state for lodging when he stayed in a free hotel room during a 10-day business trip to Asheville.

Phillips also said he had asked the State Budget Office for a legal ruling on the issue of whether he and his subordinates may bill the state for lodging expenses when they stay in free hotel rooms.

"And we'll abide by that," Phillips said. "To clear the air, I have already refunded my part of it completely."

Meanwhile, state Auditor Edward Renfrow said it appeared that Phillips and nine subordinates, who also charged the state for lodging after staying in free hotel rooms on the business trip, should refund the money. Renfrow said his office would investigate their expense accounts.

"We'll look at it for the current year and previous years, to see if that situation has existed for any other conferences," Renfrow said.

The State Budget Office rule allows state employees to collect $32 per night for lodging and $15 a day for meals regardless of the actual cost, officials said.

Phillips and nine other state school officials spent up to 10 nights in free hotel rooms this summer and then billed the state for lodging expenses.

Phillips was reimbursed $441 for lodging costs for one 10-day trip and said he saw nothing wrong with charging the state for rooms that cost state employees nothing.

Phillips repaid the state $176 Wednesday, said Lou Thompson, director of auditing and accounting in the state Controller's Office. The repayment cut the amount he was paid for lodging to $32 from $44.10 per night, and for food, to $15 from $20 a day.

Marvin K. Dorman Jr., deputy state budget officer, said Wednesday from Wilmington that he would look into the matter when he returned to Raleigh Friday.

"I would say that the rooms were those of the state because it was a state-sponsored function, but I hesitate saying any more than that without getting back and looking into it more," he said.

Phillips and the other Department of Public Instruction officials attended meetings in Asheville sponsored by the department July 6-16. The meetings included two Summer Leadership Conferences attended by about 1,500 local education officials.

"We get complimentary rooms based on the total occupancy of people who register with our conference," said L. Reeves McGlohon, associate state superintendent.

McGlohon said eight other department employees attended the July meetings, receiving from three to 10 nights of free lodging.

Political Parties Spar Over Senate Candidates

The Associated Press

RALEIGH — Political parties sparred Thursday over which U.S. Senate candidate had a better record on taxes and debated whether judicial races should have political overtones.

"Time after time, Mr. Broyhill has voted for tax breaks for the wealthy, but not for average families," Jim Van Hecke, state Democratic Party chairman, said in a news conference. "Tax breaks for oil companies, but not for child care. Tax cuts for utilities, but tax hikes for tobacco."

Van Hecke said Democratic Senate nominee Terry Sanford favored the tax reform bill before Congress, but that Sen. Jim Broyhill voted against it when he was in the U.S. House.

Broyhill spokeswoman Lisa Brewer said there was no recorded vote on the House version of the tax bill, but that Broyhill had "expressed reservations" about it.

"However, he has always been a strong and active supporter of the Republican Senate version, which put forward a real program of tax simplification, which would lower individual rates even further than the House version. ... and drop 6 million of the poorest from the tax rolls," she said.

"I think it's real ironic that the Democrats would accuse Mr. Broyhill of not supporting middle-income taxpayers when you've got Terry Sanford out there putting the food tax on us (when he was governor)."

Van Hecke said Broyhill in 1981 voted to give $16 billion in oil and energy tax breaks over five years, and in 1975 voted for oil-industry-backed amendments to keep their special depletion allowances.

He said it would be hard for Broyhill to vote against the tax bill two months before the election. "But what we need to realize is that other tax bills will probably come up in the next six years."

Later Thursday, former Gov. Jim Holshouser, speaking for the Republican-run Citizens for a Conservative Court, criticized Democrat James Exum for consistently opposing the death penalty as an associate Supreme Court justice. Holshouser also defended the CCC, saying the group was formed to get around Democratic attempts to keep the issues out of the spotlight and that Exum had already publicly professed his opposition to capital punishment.

"A majority of our state Supreme Court is up for election, and despite the fact that an informed electorate is the key to sound democracy, the so-called Judicial Code of Ethics prohibits its candidates from discussing the issues," he said.

The group issued a list of Exum's dissents in death penalty cases before he resigned from the court to run against Chief Justice Rhoda Billings in November.

"Since 1978, when our present death penalty was enacted, the North Carolina Supreme Court has reviewed and approved the death penalty in 24 cases," Holshouser said. "Exum has opposed the court's decision in all but six of those."

Van Hecke, who said the code came from an American Bar Association code adopted by 45 states, earlier had released copies of a letter asking Republican nominees for judgeships to disassociate themselves from a group campaigning on their behalf.

"We specifically call on the 10 Republican candidates for statewide judicial office to repudiate the Citizens for a Conservative Court and to stop that group from continuing its dangerous conduct," he said.

Holshouser responded that his group would "respect the wishes of Chief Justice Billings that the campaign be conducted on a high plane." But he said the group would continue making public "the professional issues and opinions of the candidates."

"What the justices personally believe is irrelevant," countered Van Hecke. "They're there to interpret the laws, not to make the laws.

"They want to run an ideological type of campaign for the court, and it's very obvious why they want to do that," he added. "They will have two years of appellate court experience in their nominees to our 15. They can't run based on experience or qualifications."

Police: Crack Moving North With Migrants

The Associated Press

RALEIGH — Interstate 95 has become a major thoroughfare for the distribution of crack, a highly addictive form of cocaine, and some migrant farm workers from Florida are among those arrested on drug charges this year, authorities say.

"We know that a lot of this is coming into our area from Florida," said Dunn Police Chief Everett L. Norton.

Dunn police confiscated 5.6 ounces of crack Wednesday in what the State Bureau of Investigation calls the largest seizure of that drug in a single arrest in North Carolina.

Norton said he believes migrant workers have contributed to the increase of crack in rural areas and smaller cities like Dunn.

"Basically what we're finding is the migrants coming up from Florida and their dealers coming with them," said detective Ricky G. Storey of the Johnston County Sheriff's Department. "They bring it up to sell among themselves, but then it spreads out to the general public."

The Johnston Sheriff's Department has arrested about 20 migrant workers this year on charges related to crack, Storey said Wednesday. Most of those arrested have been from Florida and have come to North Carolina to harvest crops such as tobacco and sweet potatoes.

Other sizable seizures of crack have occurred this year in Greenville and in Hendersonville, in the western part of the state, authorities have said.

"We're finding it all across the state and it certainly, now, is in the rural areas," Charles Dunn, deputy director of the SBI, said Wednesday. "Before, we were picking it up at the airports, but now I think it's coming more up the interstates."

THE INSIDE STORY:
James B. Wilson answers reader mail each Saturday in the Citizen and Times

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